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ABSTRACT

This paper looks at alternative assessment and explores its place in educational reform. It gives a snapshot of alternative assessment in practice, guidelines for establishing it as part of the urban school culture, and resources for additional information. Alternative assessments differ from traditional tests in that they require students to construct responses to open-ended problems that have more than one correct answer. Alternative assessments also make success explicit by using a set of standards as their measuring stick instead of using relative comparisons to other students. No form of assessment alone should drive educational reform, but alternative assessment can be an important part of reform agendas because it fits well with current paradigm shifts in education. There are many misunderstandings about alternative assessment, the most common being the assumption that it is subjective, but approaches have been developed to enhance the reliability of alternative assessments. In the urban context, alternative assessment can be especially valuable because it promotes equity, increases motivation, raises standards, empowers students and teachers, and focuses attention on teaching and learning. Five examples of the use of alternative assessment in urban public schools illustrate how useful it can be. (Contains 18 references.) (SLD)

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Urban Monograph Series

ED 397 201

Transforming Teaching and Learning in Urban Schools Through Alternative Assessment

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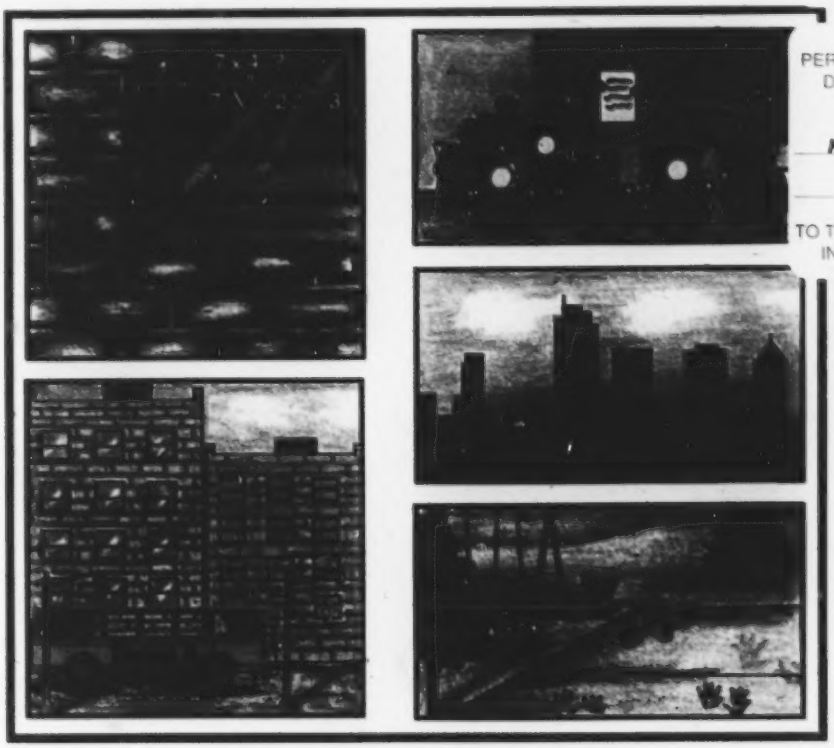

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The Urban Education Program's mission is to improve education for urban children and youth, especially those who are underachieving and historically underserved. We provide products and services that connect superintendents, principals, and teachers from nearly 5,000 urban schools to research and best practice. We work in partnership with schools and districts to build capacity for (1) teaching advanced skills to all students, (2) implementing multicultural education, (3) leading school change and innovation, and (4) supporting professional development that promotes whole school change.

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Dear Colleague:

Many urban students complete school and make a successful transition to higher education. However, an increasing number of poor and minority youth either drop out of or finish school without the skills and knowledge they need to continue their education and participate in today's high-tech, information-service economy.

NCREL believes that connecting practitioners and policymakers to information about what works in urban schools is an important step in bridging the achievement gap between the region's urban children and others. Traditionally, solutions to problems of urban schools have focused on isolated programs or single subjects and have relied heavily on knowledge from one field—education. The achievement gap between urban children and others is the result of many factors. Solutions that draw on a broad knowledge base are more likely to be effective in attacking the problems that impede urban children's success in school than solutions that rely solely on knowledge about schooling.

The Urban Education Monograph Series connects practitioners and policymakers to important information about what works in urban schools by drawing on knowledge from the fields of education, sociology, cultural anthropology, and others. This series includes the following papers:

- *Building Collaborative Cultures: Seeking Ways to Reshape Urban Schools* (Kent Peterson, University of Wisconsin at Madison, with Richard Brietzke, Purdy Elementary School, Fort Atkinson, Wisconsin)
- *Cultural Diversity and Academic Achievement* (Barbara Bowman, Erikson Institute, with an introduction by John Attinasi, California State University)
- *Developing Resilience in Urban Youth* (Linda Winfield, University of Southern California)
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- *Organizational Structures to Promote Teacher Engagement in Urban Schools* (Karen Seashore Louis, University of Minnesota at Minneapolis)
- *Raising Expectations to Improve Student Learning* (Jerry Bamburg, University of Washington at Seattle)
- *Rising to the Challenge: Emerging Strategies for Educating Youth At Risk* (Nettie Legters, Johns Hopkins University and Edward L. McDill, Johns Hopkins University and Center for Social Organization of Schools)
- *Synthesis of Scholarship in Multicultural Education* (Geneva Gay, University of Washington at Seattle)
- *Transforming Teaching and Learning in Urban Schools Through Alternative Assessment* (Deborah L. Winking and Linda Ann Bond, NCREL)

We welcome your comments on the Urban Education Monograph Series and your suggestions about other issues that you would like us to address in the future.

Sincerely,

Lynn J. Stinnette
Director, Urban Education

Transforming Teaching and Learning in Urban Schools Through Alternative Assessment

by Deborah L. Winking and Linda Ann Bond

What You and Your School Should Know About Alternative Assessment

As administrators and teachers only five years shy of entering the 21st century, we find ourselves in the midst of yet another "new" national fervor around educational accountability. Concerns for accountability, which are aggravated by harsh fiscal realities and global comparisons, underlie increasing public demands for hard evidence of what students are learning. These demands have led to the proliferation of norm-referenced standardized tests, minimum competency examinations, and standards designed to "raise the bar" for student achievement. However, dissatisfaction with the overall job norm-referenced standardized tests *alone* have done in accurately portraying what students can and should be able to do has led to the development of alternative assessments. Educators increasingly use alternative assessment to help them gain a deeper understanding of student learning, and more successfully communicate evidence of that learning to parents, employers, and the community at large.

This paper will provide you with a practical introduction to what alternative assessment is and its place in education reform. It will also provide a snapshot view of what alternative assessment looks like in practice within a school, guidelines for establishing alternative assessment as part of the urban school culture, and resources for additional information.

What Is Alternative Assessment and Why Is it Considered "Alternative"?

Alternative assessment stands in direct contrast to more traditional tests, which measure facts alone. It has its roots in classroom practice—teachers informally using practical assignments to help make decisions about their students' progress, to diagnosis specific learning difficulties, and to help refine instructional methods accordingly. Because our notion of important learning outcomes have been changing over the past decade, alternative assessment methods have become recognized as a vital part of school, district, and state assessment efforts. Knowledge is important, but simply memorizing facts is not enough. Since information doubles every three years, tests that measure acquisition of facts alone aren't sufficient for understanding what it takes to succeed in today's complex society. Students need to be able to sort through vast quantities of knowledge and apply that which is appropriate to unique and ambiguous problems.

Traditional tests require students to *identify* an answer from a list that includes a correct

response (predetermined by the test publisher) and three or four plausible distracters or incorrect answers. Alternative assessments differ from traditional test in that they require students to construct responses to open-ended problems that have more than one correct answer.

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Using this definition, short answer and essay questions, oral presentations, exhibitions, drawings, dramatic performances, and portfolios of work completed over time all may be considered alternative assessments. Possibly one of the most important contributions of the proliferation of new forms of assessment has been the realization that we, as educators, need an array of assessment tools at our disposal to understand learning. Traditional assessment is particularly useful for efficiently assessing student knowledge and the limited applications of that knowledge. However, alternative assessment is the appropriate tool when the job is understanding the process students go through in solving complex, "real world" problems.

Another fundamental way in which alternative and traditional assessments differ is their reference points. In the past, the "ruler" against which we measured success was the typical performance of a student's peers (i.e., "the norm"). We know that the norm can be highly inflated or deflated, depending on individual scores. Therefore, gauging "how good is good enough" based *only* on relative standing within a group ignores an absolute level of learning and expertise that we want to foster in all students. Alternative assessments make explicit *exactly* "what is good enough" by using a set of standards as their measuring stick instead of relative comparisons.

Generally speaking, standards are statements that groups and individuals, usually with a vested interest in education, believe best describe a desired performance. Content standards, sometimes called content frameworks, describe what students should know and be able to do. Performance standards describe the quality level or fluency of desired student performance and/or with what fluency a performance is desired in a given assignment. These two types of standards delineate goals for student performance or student accountability. However, states, districts, and schools that are concerned with systemic school improvement, and not just "raising test scores," have learned they will not succeed in realizing student accountability standards without addressing school or system accountability as well.

Standards that specify the level of resources, materials, opportunities, instruction, and general learning climate needed within a school are called delivery standards. Resnick (1987) describes opportunity-to-learn or delivery standards as the promise of the system to students that they will only be held accountable for high standards if they are ensured the opportunity to learn that which will be assessed.

The Place of Assessment in Educational Improvement

No form of assessment alone—neither traditional nor alternative—*alone* should drive educational reform. On the contrary, assessment should be one important part of helping a school community achieve its vision for school

improvement. What alternative assessment seeks to assist in overall school improvement is to shift focus to those things that we as educators think are important—that is, the outcomes, processes, and skills that students will need to succeed in the 21st century. If seen as a seamless part of the teaching-learning-evaluation loop, alternative assessment can help teachers, parents, and the community at large better understand what students can and should be able to do.

Alternative Assessment Fits Well Within Current Educational Paradigms

Because it fits well with current paradigm shifts in education, alternative assessment can be a critical vehicle for furthering and realizing reform agendas. Some of its uses and benefits are outlined below.

The task of changing the way we assess what students know and can do should be *one* part of realizing our school's vision for improved learning, not the only part. This vision, realized by involving the school community (principal, teachers, students, parents, school board, employers, and community members) in a school improvement process, will result in:

- Developing a consensus that changing the current system is necessary to improve learning.
- Determining valued learning outcomes by clearly identifying and defining what students should know and be able to do as a result of their educational experiences.
- Determining delivery standards by clearly delineating the school community's responsibility to students and providing assurances that all students will have the supports and opportunity to learn that which will be assessed.
- Designing curriculum and instructional approaches that will help students learn valued outcomes, and providing professional development opportunities for teachers to adapt and transform their classroom practice.
- Developing an aligned assessment system at the classroom, school, district, and state levels that offers evidence of how well students are achieving valued learning outcomes.
- Building a reporting system for students, parents, and the community that offers useful information about where students and the school stand with respect to the learning outcomes and delivery standards.
- Evaluating the effectiveness of the above steps for defining, teaching, learning, and assessing valued learner outcomes, and for making adjustments as needed.

Alternative assessment:

- **Is site-based or contextualized to schools**

  Teachers, parents, and students at the school level have a say in determining valued learning outcomes. Assessment tasks, projects, or exhibitions should be designed to have a high degree of respect for the learning outcomes articulated by these local groups.

- **Supports professionalism and collegiality among teachers**

  According to Calfee and Perfumo (1993), "The movement toward alternative assessment is nothing short of a grassroots revolution . . . that is, teachers regaining control of assessment policy." Alternative assessment systems are built using "bottom up processes" in which teachers are seen as central to creating valid, useful assessments. They are not seen as potential threats to validity.

- **Recognizes the need for use of multiple measures collected over time to understand complex learning**

  Partly because they represent complete real-world challenges, alternative assessments are often complex endeavors that students engage in over a period of time. These differ from standardized on-demand tests that provide only a snapshot view of student performance on a single occasion. Newer forms of assessment many times require students to show what they have learned using the written and spoken word, performance, demonstration, and exhibition. Particularly, two forms of alternative assessment, portfolios and observation records, build a basis for judging performance on a body of work that is collected over time.

- **Allows students the opportunity to take learning into their own hands**

  Students are involved in determining the standards, assessments, and criteria that will be used to judge their performances. What used to be considered teaching to the test, is now part of making expectations explicit so that students can take charge of their own learning.

- **Prizes complete intellectual challenges and engaged learning**

  Today we know that good instruction actively engages students in the learning process (Jones, Valdez, Nowakowski, Rasmussen, 1994). Good assessment should do the same thing. For example, Garcia & Pearson (1991) reported that many standardized reading assessments present students with a selection of relatively short passages followed by a series of multiple-choice questions to which there is one correct answer. Students are required to complete the tests within short, prescribed time limits. Alternative assessments provide the opportunity to evaluate sustained reading and nonroutine problem solving of the stripe students are presented with in daily life.

- **Recognizes that adults often work in groups and ensures that group work is part of performance**

  Alternative assessment, particularly portfolios, exhibitions, and observation records can recognize and give credit

for partial and/or developing knowledge, as well as credit group processes that go undetected using "one-shot" timed tests.

Determining Purpose and Use of Assessment Information

Teachers and administrators selecting or developing assessments think that their choice is between standardized and alternative. The fact is, it's not that simple. Thinking of assessment in this limited way is grossly inadequate. It tends to oversimplify traits and lump all assessment into two types, each carrying misleading generalizations. Consider these statements:

> Alternative assessments are not as reliable as standardized tests because they are based solely on teacher judgments.

> Standardized tests are more likely to be corrupted because teachers are under pressure to make sure their students score well.

In fact, neither generalization is true. Proponents of alternative assessment recognize that there is subjectivity inherent in all human endeavors, including test construction. However, scoring processes have been developed that make alternative assessments highly reliable. The second generalization implies that alternative assessments are merely stimulating activities that have no consequences. Depending on the how assessment information is used and interpreted, newer forms are just as subject to corruption as standardized tests have been in the past. As these examples illustrate, understanding and clarifying the purposes for assessing are critical and should be the first step in developing an assessment system. To clarify assessment purpose, it is most important to understand how the information generated will be used and by whom.

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Assessment is used to provide information. Who is using the information and how it is used determines the "stakes" in assessment.

Q: Which of the following is an example of a "high-stakes" assessment for students?

(a) A chapter test at the end of a geometry book
(b) A new standardized state test
(c) A teacher's ongoing chronicle of student writing
(d) A language arts alternative assessment developed by district teams of teachers

A: This question illustrates the point made above. All or none of the above examples are high stakes assessments, depending on whether the information is used in ways that have specific consequences for students (e.g., assessment information is used to determine retention, admission into advanced placement classes, graduation, etc.).

- High-stakes assessments are assessments that have specific positive and negative consequences for sites, districts, schools, programs, and/or students.

- Low-stakes assessments are assessments that encourage student and teacher reflection and are used to inform the teaching and learning process within classrooms.

Common uses for assessment information include determining the efficacy of a new computer lab, diagnosing a student's reading miscues so a teacher can individualize instructional strategies, reporting mathematics gains to the school board, describing overall trends in U.S. education, and so forth. Other examples, considered by many as "misuses" include using assessment data to label students in ways that exclude them from certain educational opportunities. The "stakes" in each one of these examples depends on what consequences are incurred by assessing and for whom are they incurred.

Because alternative assessments often have their roots in classroom assessment practice, they are considered low-stakes assessments, assessments that help inform the teaching and learning process within classrooms. However, because they provide more direct measures of student performance, alternative assessments are increasingly being used as part of high-stakes evaluation systems. In fact, many high-stakes alternative assessment systems are being designed to assist in improving instruction and to ensure student and system accountability, thereby blurring the distinction between high-stakes and low-stakes assessment. This is the case with high-stakes assessment systems being developed by the New Standards Project and the Kentucky Instructional Results Information System (KIRIS). For further information about either of these assessment and standards initiatives, write to Kentucky Instructional Results Information System, Kentucky Department of Education, 500 Mero Street, Frankfurt, Kentucky 40601; and New Standards Project, Learning Research Development Center (LRDC), University of Pittsburgh, 3939 O'Hara Street, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania 15260.

Ensuring That Our Assessments Are Providing Useful and Accurate Information

Assessments are worthless unless they provide accurate information that teachers, students, and parents can use to make important decisions about learning. When designing assessments and/or assessment systems, there are three major quality issues to be considered: consistency or reliability of scores, the validity of the decisions that are made because of those scores, and the extent to which the assessment gives all students an equal opportunity to demonstrate what they know.

First, the consistency or reliability of the scores is a prerequisite to any interpretation about the scores. If several teachers can look at a given student's work and arrive at very different conclusions about the quality of that work, then the assessment results are "inconsistent" or "unreliable." In other words, what good is the information if students who are achieving at essentially the same level are told that their performances are high, medium, and low depending on the teacher who judges their performances or the particular items/tasks used? Lack of reliability is almost always the result of poorly defined scoring criteria, misunderstandings or disagreements among teachers/scorers about what the scoring criteria should be, and/or an inadequate selection of the content to be assessed. It can also be the result of bias; that is, the test content or scorer favors one group of students over another based on

factors other than the quality of the students' performances (Herman, Aschbacher & Winters, 1992).

The second major quality issue has to do with how well the assessment results reflect the valued outcomes being measured. If we want to know how well a student can read, but the assessment questions are read to that student, then the student's score cannot be interpreted as an accurate depiction of the student's reading ability. Likewise, if we want to know if a student can write well, adding up his or her scores on a vocabulary test, a grammar test, and a penmanship test does not give us this answer. We need to have the student write. Many times using such proxy measures in place of the authentic performance that we are looking for undermines the validity of the claims we can make based on our measures.

Equity and fairness should be a central concern when designing an assessment system. While most of us think about this in terms of the assessment content itself (is it culturally biased and dependent upon the prior knowledge and experience of one culture over another?), it is equally important to consider whether or not all children are given the same opportunity to learn the test content, or whether some are denied that opportunity because of inferior schools or dead-end tracking into low-level, remedial courses (O'Day & Smith, 1993). The only way that we can *fairly* and justly hold students accountable for performance is if we hold ourselves and our schools responsible for ensuring all students equal opportunities to learn that which we are assessing.

Dispelling Some Common Misunderstandings About Alternative Assessment

Given the current rhetoric surrounding assessment and differing (epistemological) stances on what constitutes valid evidence of student achievement, misunderstandings about alternative assessment are quite understandable to say the least. The following quotes reflect common misunderstandings regarding new forms of assessment from the perspectives of teachers, parents, administrators, and students. Insights from research and practice are used to illuminate and dispel these misunderstandings.

Teachers

Myth: *"Classroom activities cannot be valid assessments."*

When experimenting with alternative assessment for the first time, many teachers are surprised that their daily classroom activities may be the basis for these assessments. This initial reticence to seeing their practical assignments as "bonafide" assessment is partly due to them having been inundated with norm-referenced tests, which privilege standardization over teacher judgment (Darling-Hammond, 1989). In many ways, the norm-referenced testing industry has sufficiently mystified the process of making inferences about student achievement so that teachers do not readily connect what they do in the classroom to assessment. In other cases, teachers are comfortable with assigning complex substantive projects but are unfamiliar with using rubrics and dimensional scoring to evaluate performance and generate aggregate statements about achievement. After working with alternative assessment, teachers are generally refreshed by the realization that administrators, researchers, and test makers are at long last recognizing what they have known all along: Work samples and responses to real-life problems are invaluable direct measures of what students can do.

Principal

Myth: *"Students of color fare poorly on alternative assessments."*

Some research has been conducted that shows that students of diverse ethnic and racial backgrounds actually perform as poorly or even more poorly on alternative assessments than they do on traditional multiple-choice tests (Feinberg, 1990; Linn, Baker, & Dunbar, 1991). A closer look reveals that the performance assessments used in these studies are heavily dependent upon expertise in areas in which culturally diverse students are already faring poorly due to inequitable access to learning opportunities. The solution to this problem is adopting equitable, culturally responsive *instructional* practices that apply to all students and *not* simply avoiding new assessment tools that assess the very higher-order cognitive processes we are interested in fostering. Such practices help all students gain expertise and recognize and respect diverse culturally based learning styles. In fact, it may be argued that, if the old adage "that which is assessed is taught" holds true, the movement to high standards and thinking assessments may be useful in illuminating inequities and accelerating reforms toward improved learned for all students.

Students

Myth: *"What's the answer? What are you looking for here?"*

Students' first responses to alternative assessment are the most interesting. During early encounters with open-ended challenges, the teacher is likely to hear rustling of paper, sighs of perplexity, and queries of "Is this the right way to do it?" Teachers are more likely to get this response from middle or high school students, particularly if they have been conditioned to tests in which the purpose is to find the correct answer from a limited number of choices (e.g., multiple-choice tests) or to respond to dichotomous questions (e.g., true-false or yes-no tests). Students who have grown up within such a system will more than likely be uncomfortable with the task of constructing and justifying the correctness of their own response. This is less of a problem for young children. However, as students become used to assessments that require them respond to nonroutine intellectual challenges, they will find that there is not one correct answer and that that's okay.

Parents

Myth: *"I know what 95 percent means. I don't know what scores on these new assessments mean."*

If parents and the general public are wary about alternative assessments, it is likely that they do not understand them. Schools and districts that develop assessments and report results need to do a better job at helping audiences interpret and use the information generated. Many times parents who have grown up with percentage-based grading systems (e.g., 93 - 100 % = an "A") believe somehow that an "A" is equivalent to an absolute level of knowledge and skill, when in fact it is based on a number of factors including teacher judgment, test scores, student's relative standing in the class derived from test scores, and so forth. In developing alternative assessment systems as part of a comprehensive plan for improved learning, educators have a responsibility to bring parents into the process of building standards and evaluating progress using real examples of student's work to illustrate desired levels of performance. Only when interpreted

in context do alternative assessment results become meaningful and useful.

What Does Alternative Assessment Look Like in Practice Within a School Like Yours? (And How Would You Know it if You Saw it Operating?)

Alternative assessment, "done right" in schools, does not and should not alone drive school improvement. However, it does allow teachers, students, and community members to determine together what are valued outcomes and helps them focus their energies in these important areas.

Alternative assessment does not happen as an "event" scheduled into the school calendar, rather it is woven into the fabric of daily teaching and learning. You should be able to see traces of it as you walk throughout the building . . .

- In the lounge, you see a group of three teachers discussing the performance of students. It is clear from the language they are using that these teachers, although from different subject areas, share an understanding of expectations for student performance (performance standards).

- In a third-grade classroom, you see a colorful grid on the wall written in "kid" language and penmanship. One line reads, "Complexity . . . when we solve problems, we think about what we already know and have read and learned to build an answer that uses our own thoughts and experiences along with what we find in books. . . ." From this grid you can see what is expected of students and you can see that clearly students know, too. They know what to work toward in their daily assessments because they helped their teacher determine and operationalize the expectations that would be used to judge their performance.

- In a sixth-grade room, student peer reviewers are discussing the work of their group members. They are taking this task very seriously as their ratings will be considered in the teacher's evaluation of each student's performance.

- After school, you overhear a lively discussion between a committee of teachers and community members. They are discussing what "proficient" and "developing" performance means as they try to reach consensus about rating student exhibitions.

What is most striking on this tour through the halls is the amount of energy and dialogue focused on teaching and learning. Much of this activity is the result of assessment that makes public the aims of instruction and makes everyone, students not withstanding, part of the dialogue about important goals, challenging and worthwhile tasks, and criteria for success.

Why Use Alternative Assessment in the Urban Context?

There are a number of reasons for using alternative assessment in the urban context to support your school's overall vision of improved learning for all students.

Alternative Assessment:

- **Promotes equity**

  Alternative assessment provides an opportunity to acknowledge the diverse prior knowledge of students of different ethnic backgrounds.

- **Increases motivation**

  Alternative assessment frequently uses real-life tasks, which may be more motivating for students who have not traditionally succeeded in school.

- **Raises standards**

  The process of articulating learning outcomes may be used to identify attitudes or practices that perpetuate lowered expectations. Moving toward alternative assessment may be used as an opportunity to foster a climate of high expectations for all students.

- **Empowers students**

  An emphasis on making performance expectations explicit for everyone provides students with an opportunity to take charge of their own learning.

- **Supports teacher professionalism**

  Because alternative assessment privileges teacher judgments and views teachers as an integral part of the assessment process, it invests teachers in the change process and sets the expectation that teachers will rise to the challenge of transforming instruction and learning.

- **Focuses attention on teaching and learning**

  In today's schools, learning increasingly takes a back seat to noninstructional concerns such as violence and community division. Alternative assessment, because it requires input from all members, refocuses the school community's attention on teaching and learning.

The following provides guidelines for building a comprehensive assessment system within the urban school culture that is designed to promote high standards for all students.

Guidelines for Building an Alternative Assessment System Within the Urban School Culture

- Identifies and articulates the school's purposes for assessing school work given their overall vision for school improvement.

- Include teachers, students, families, employers, and other community perspectives in the process of developing or selecting assessments, standards, scoring procedures, and reporting styles.

- Devise school delivery standards that describe the support students will receive from the school community to assist them in meeting high standards.

- Design the system backwards beginning with desired learning outcomes and moving backward to build assessments and link instruction to outcomes to ensure that assessments are precisely focused on valued outcomes.

- Devise a plan for working with parents and the community at large to help them understand, interpret, and use alternative assessment information.

- Build multiple measures into the system to include alternative and standardized measures. (No single assessment tool can

wholly and fairly describe the complexities of learning experiences.)

- Report accurate interpretations of alternative assessment and standardized test scores, recognizing the purposes and limitations of each.

Urban Schools Using Alternative Assessment

A growing number of urban schools around the country have chosen alternative assessment as a way of helping them realize their vision for school improvement. The following provides descriptions and contact information for selected schools that are building alternative assessments as part of transforming their teaching and learning.

Public School #261, Brooklyn, NY

Administrative support and engaged learning are keys factors in developing an environment where curriculum, instruction, and assessment are aligned in this prekindergarten through sixth-grade building. Since students are involved in engaging learning activities, teachers can take the time necessary to conduct individual student assessment activities without bringing learning to a screeching halt for the rest of class. Principal, Arthur Foresta provides advise to other urban school leaders approaching performance assessment:

> *The most important thing is to be respectful of the alternatives that teachers are already using in their classrooms to understand student growth. Sometimes administrators are quick to impose change on teachers without recognizing their individual teaching and learning styles. Any success we have had at PS #261 can be attributed to building on what teachers were already doing.*

While teachers at PS #261 use a variety of teacher-made and commercially available assessments, the tool most widely used is the Primary Language Record (PLR) (Center for Language, 1988). Using the PLR, teachers interview parents about their child three times during the year, interview the child, and systematically observe the child in typical learning contexts. The PLR allows teachers to zero in on student strengths and helps them design instructional strategies geared toward success. It gives teachers a common language for discussing student progress with colleagues and a framework for reflection.

Capturing students' learning, behavior, and attitudes during in-progress learning activities provides teachers with rich assessment data. Post-it™ Note pads make taking and organizing notes on multiple children feasible. According to Foresta, it is commonplace to see teachers holding a pad of Post-it™ Notes as they work with children within and outside the building Individual "learning" notes are dated and organized to provide a running record of student progress. Alternative assessment tools have spawned the development of a teacher-developed report card that provides parents with rich narrative information that is not possible using the standard checklist format. For teachers at PS #261, the PLR was a natural because it embodied practices and a developmental philosophy about children in which they already believed.

At PS #261, teachers work together in cross-grade level groups to discuss instructional strategies based on assessment information and to work on their PLRs with the support of their colleagues. No matter what form the assessment takes, according to Foresta, the principal

and the district must be committed to making time for teachers. In the already packed school day, commitment sometimes means coming up with creative ways to provide teachers with significant blocks of time to work together.

For more information on how the principal and staff at PS #261 work together to support assessment activities that are focused on improved student learning, contact: *Arthur Foresta, Principal, Public School #261, 314 Pacific St., Brooklyn, NY 11201, (718) 330-9275.*

Harper High School, Chicago, IL

Harper High School is a public high school on the south side of Chicago with an enrollment of 1,350. Mr. Richard Parker is the principal, and Mr. Robert Anderson serves as the curriculum coordinator. Since the spring of 1994, Harper High School has been engaged in the development of a schoolwide, performance-based assessment system for grades 9-12 that is aligned to the school's exit outcomes. The school has established partnerships with North Central Regional Education Laboratory, the QUEST Center (a Chicago Teachers' Union program, funded by the MacArthur Foundation, to support "revolutionary change in Chicago city schools") and the Small Schools Project with the University of Illinois at Chicago.

During the summer of 1994 and during the 1994-95 school years, Harper's curriculum coordinator and the entire instructional staff have learned about performance assessments, and have created and pilot tested performance assessments in a number of subject areas and within their schools-within-schools program. Working with Dr. Linda Bond, the director of assessment for North Central Regional Educational Laboratory, teams of teachers in mathematics, science, English and social studies, as well as from one of the two interdisciplinary schools-within-a-school, worked together during the summer to clarify their learner outcomes, realign curriculum and instruction to those outcomes, and determine project-based performance assessments that could serve as end-of-course or end-of-unit exams. The state-selected benchmark grade for high school, grade 11, was selected as the place to start.

During the following school year, these teams were expanded to include all of the teachers in every department, and further refinement of the performance assessments and the rubrics was carried out. The teams that were furthest ahead pilot tested their instruments during the fall of 1994 and the spring of 1995, and revised their assessments for use next year. They are continuing to develop assessments for other subject areas and courses as well. Harper has applied for a grant from the Chicago Board of Education to continue this work during the summer of 1995. They will be paying particular attention to the development of rubrics, standards, and expectations, and the determination of validity, reliability, and fairness.

For information on the project, contact: *Robert Anderson, Harper High School, 6520 S. Wood St., Chicago, IL 60636, (312) 535-9239.*

The Foundations School, Chicago, IL

The Foundations School is a teacher-designed, teacher-led, nongraded elementary school that has taken on the challenge of improving teaching and learning through assessment reform. Staff in this multi-aged, heterogeneously grouped K-8 building have developed a comprehensive performance-based alternative assessment system that aligns curriculum,

instruction, and assessment with the Chicago Learning Outcomes (content standards designed by teachers). Two important components of the system are the (1) prototype instructional and assessment units and (2) the collection and exhibition of showcase portfolios.

Prototype Assessment and Instruction Units

Staff have developed several comprehensive interdisciplinary units, each of which begin with a provocative, driving question written in kid-friendly language and end in a culminating task. The units are designed to move students toward mastery of important learning outcomes. For example, at the primary level, various parts of the architecture unit engage students in writing, planning, measuring, reading, designing, creating, and researching. The finale is a culminating task that challenges students to synthesize and apply what they have learned, such as "design your ideal space." Students and teachers rate the work using rubrics that are directly linked to components of a specific learning outcome. The units are cumulative and build on students' prior knowledge across levels in ultimately reaching a fourth- or eighth-grade Learning Outcome benchmark. For new teachers or those seeking to replicate, or model from, the units, the packages also include a materials list, bibliography, and ideas for extending the unit.

Collection and Showcase Portfolios

As part of a Chicago Public Schools grant, the Foundations School is developing a local school assessment system—including videos and portfolios, and conference progress reports—that moves with students throughout their school careers. Students take charge of their own learning by making decisions about which pieces of work from their "everyday" Collection Portfolio go into their Showcase Portfolio. It is this Showcase Portfolio, along with assessment pieces, which is presented to parents and teachers at a "portfolio defense" day. While students may be thinking about the contents of their showcase portfolio throughout the year, they begin gathering their pieces approximately three weeks before what in the past was called "report card" time. Although students are responsible for selecting work, there are specific guidelines for the Showcase Portfolio contents. It may include math journals, author journals, science experiments, reading logs, art projects, and favorite work, but it must always include a piece of work that shows growth over time. For students, this means a piece that shows "who you were at the beginning of the year and who you are now." So while the Showcase does not compare students against each other (only against themselves and the task), its Showcase Portfolio provides two important measures: (1) comparison of the student against his own accomplishments over time and (2) attainment of the learning outcomes. The portfolios also include teacher, self-, and peer ratings of students' work, and students' ratings of their own teacher and their classroom. Following the portfolio defense, parents have the opportunity to rate and provide comment about their children's progress.

Finally, a progress conference sheet, developed on a five-part carbon form, is used to respond to parents on students' mastery of important concepts. Parents can use the unique carbon system to keep a cumulative record of student growth over time. Students rate their school and their parents cooperation in helping them learn, and they rate themselves. Parents rate the school and the classroom. These progress conference sheets are used to inform instruc-

tional design and focus parents on what school staff feel is important.

While staff at the Foundations school feel that they have come a long way in aligning curriculum, instruction, and assessment with important learning outcomes, they still feel that they have a long way to go. One goal is to achieve high interrater reliability on overall portfolio contents ratings so that portfolios can be used as the primary measure for showing mastery of the learning outcomes.

For more information on assessment at the Foundations School contact: *Lynn Cherkasky-Davis, Foundations School, 231 E. 38th St., Chicago, IL 60653, (312) 535-1323.*

The Key School and the **Key Renaissance School,** Indianapolis, IN

Both the Key and Key Renaissance Schools are based on Howard Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences. They hope eventually to be in one building with grades K-12. The schools were designed by a group of teachers and a principal who believed that children needed the opportunity to develop all of their seven intelligences (linguistic, logical-mathematical, spatial, bodily-kinesthetic, musical, interpersonal, and intrapersonal), not just the linguistic and logical-mathematical intelligences that are the primary focus of most schools. The children who attend choose to come and are selected by lottery. Once students are enrolled, they maintain their enrollment throughout their K-8 career.

Because instructional strategies encompass all of the intelligences, and because students are provided with many intelligence-based opportunities to learn, it is not surprising that student assessment is also dealt with differently than in more traditional public schools. The Key School assessment of students' progress follows a developmental continuum. Interdisciplinary themes, student projects, and Developmental Performance Descriptors are interconnected in a systematic effort to produce cumulative portfolios, video portfolios, and "quality exemplars." An illustration follows. Each year, the school decides upon three themes to guide the students' work. At the end of each theme, each student presents a project based upon that theme using any of their intelligences to showcase their project. For example, some students may develop a skit or play, some may write poetry or product an artistic interpretation of the theme, and some may write a paper discussing their understanding of the theme. The students' presentations of their projects are videotaped, and each student has a video portfolio. Students are still required to take standardized tests as required by the Indianapolis Public Schools District and the state of Indiana. However, although students do well, the results of these exams are believed to be a very narrow reflection of what Key students know and can do.

The Key School presents a series of two-day Summer Institutes that provide numerous details about their program and assessment strategies.

For more information, contact: *Mary Ann Sullivan, Public Relations,* or *Patricia Bolanos, Principal, Key School, 222 E. Ohio St., Indianapolis, IN 46204, (317) 226-4992 or -4996.*

Sheridan Global Arts and Communication School, Minneapolis, MN

At Sheridan Global Arts and Communication School, assessment is in the hands students and teachers. At the heart of all curriculum, instruction, and assessment are clearly stated interdisciplinary global studies learner outcomes that integrate language arts, fine arts, social studies, math, and science. Some of Sheridan's current assessment activities designed to transform teaching and help students take responsibility for their own learning include systematic observation, student designed performance criteria, and student-centered portfolios.

- **Systematic Observation**

  Teachers have developed systematic observation procedures to track students' literacy development. For the past two years teachers have used their own literacy levels checklist to guide teaching, to report growth to parents, and to collect data on student achievement. Currently teachers are creating a report card that is consistent with their developmental view of progress. This report card graphically represents important learning objectives along a developmental continuum. Parents are actually able to see their children's progress over time in each objective.

- **Student-designed Performance Criteria**

  Students and teachers come together in designing rubrics or criteria for judging performance assessments. Students are taught to use these rubrics to draft and revise their projects while reflecting on their own thinking and work quality. Since students have written the rubrics and have internalized the criteria for success, they are often heard asking questions like, "Is this a rehearsal or performance?" "What makes this piece of writing quality work?"

- **Student-Selected Portfolios**

  In addition to portfolios of student work that teachers collect, Sheridan is developing student-centered portfolios. These are portfolios that require students to reflect on their work and collect samples that they present at student/teacher/parent conferences. The students have "translated" high-level concepts describing Intelligent Behaviors (Costa, 1987) into their own words and have created icons that represent that behavior for them. They use these descriptions and icons to make decisions about the quality of their work.

  Example:

  To describe the concept of persistence students use, "I keep on trying, I don't quit." The icon that accompanies this description is the Energizer® Bunny.

Teachers are also part of special project teams that are developing ways to use technology to change classroom assessment practice.

If you would like more information about how Sheridan teachers and students are transforming teaching and learning, contact: *Mary Jo Thompson, Sheridan Global Arts and Communication School, 1201 University Ave. NE, Minneapolis, MN 55410, (612) 627-2348.*

Glossary of Terms

Performance assessment: Direct, systematic observation of an actual student performance or examples of student performance and judging that performance according to preestablished performance criteria.

Rubric: An established set of criteria for scoring or rating students' performances on tests, portfolios, writing samples, or other performance tasks.

Content Standard: Agreed-upon statements about what students should know and be able to do.

Performance Standard: An established level of achievement, quality of performance, or degree of mastery expected by students.

Delivery or Opportunity-to-Learn Standard: An established level of instruction, resources, services, and access to opportunities promised by an educational system to students.

Scaffolding activities: Cumulative learning experiences that help establish a common level of prior knowledge among students; completed before or as part of a performance assessment.

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Deborah L. Winking

Dr. Winking, Program Evaluator, North Central Regional Educational Laboratory (NCREL), began her career in education teaching students with special needs. She brings this experience base and understanding of the reality teachers face in the classroom to her evaluation practice and assessment research. Her recent assessment research has explored the technical dimensions of alternative assessment as they relate to national standards setting and assessment efforts including the New Standards Project and the National Assessment of Educational Progress. Dr. Winking has extensive experience in developing and using complex assessment tasks and multiple forms of learning evidence to evaluate the impact of various educational interventions in urban schools and districts. She also provides training and technical assistance to teachers and school leaders on such topics as understanding the promise and peril of standards and high stakes assessments for diverse learners; dispelling myths about new forms of assessment; and aligning expectations, instruction, and assessment. She has served as technical consultant to a number of district standards and assessment development efforts. Recent publications in the area of assessment include *Diversity, High Standards and Alternative Assessment: A Practical Guide for Adminstrators*, and *Using Multiple Performance Assessment Measures to Evaluate the Impact of a Strategic Teaching Initiative*, both available through NCREL.

Linda Ann Bond

Dr. Bond has worked for the last three and a half years and the director of assessment for the Regional Policy Information Center at the North Central Regional Educational Laboratory in Oak Brook, Illinois. Her primary role at the lab is to help educators and education policymakers gain access to the latest research-based information in the area of student assessment. She has worked in the area of student assessment for most of her educational career having spent seven and a half years at the Indiana Department of Education, first as the project manager for a competency testing and remediation program, and later as a policy analyst in the State Superintendent's Office. She has worked with school and school district teams in the development of schoolwide alternative assessment programs. She has also worked on creating professional development materials for teachers in assessment, and has been trying out those materials in the field with teachers and principals, revising them to fit better the needs of school faculties.

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